UNFAIR GRACE

The whole burnt offering, *Leviticus 1:1-13*

Exodus narrates God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and His organization of the people into a nation through the covenant He made with them at Mount Sinai. Even though He gave the Jewish people the honor of representing His identity and will to the world, making them a holy nation by choosing to dwell in their midst, the Jewish people responded with rebellion rather than thankfulness. Exodus ends its account with a dilemma – *how would God maintain His promised relationship with rebellious Israel?* The book of Leviticus outlines God's plan to preserve His relationship with the Israelites, a program that included a series of sacrifices and offerings that mitigated the risk created by God's holy presence amid the sinful nation.

Leviticus' narrative begins with God speaking from the newly constructed and consecrated Tabernacle, His dwelling place in the midst of the nation, giving Moses detailed instructions about the offerings the Jews needed to perform. The first offering God described, the burnt offering, presents readers today with foreign practices that likely prove offensive rather than insightful. This lesson will therefore consider God's instructions about the burnt offering through which God reveals the richness of His grace towards Israel.

A burnt offering "without blemish"[1]

Leviticus opens with seven chapters dedicated to Israel's offerings and sacrifices. Their place at the beginning of the book and the amount of space dedicated to them indicates the crucial role they occupied in the nation's relationship with God.

- Two concepts prove essential to understanding the burnt offering.
    - First, sin requires death.
        - The Bible introduces God as a being who brings into existence goodness, life, and order (*Genesis 1:1-31*).
        - In contrast, sin coexists with death and disorder (*cf. Genesis 2:16-17; Deuteronomy 24:15; Romans 5:12; James 3:16*); it undoes what God brings into existence.
        - Because it undermines things essential to God's identity, serious consequences attend sin – "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (*Romans 6:23; Hebrews 9:22*).
        - Forgiveness requires death – "the shedding of blood" – because "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (*Leviticus 17:11*).
    - Second, the animal offered served as the worshipper's blameless representative.

[1] Leviticus 1:3. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

        - The animal sacrificed in the burnt offering did not 'bear' the worshipper's wrongdoing – God commanded Israel to send sin-bearing animals away from His presence (*Leviticus 16:7-10, 20-22*). Instead, the animal's blood was applied to the altar at the entrance of the Tabernacle – **the burnt offering purified God's sacred space so that an imperfect human worshipper could approach Him** (*Leviticus 1:5*).
        - The offered animal had to be "without blemish" (*Leviticus 1:3; Deuteronomy 17:1*). While 'unblemished' refers to animals that were without physical defect, the Hebrew Bible uses the same word to describe a person without moral blemish, a 'blameless' individual (*cf. Genesis 6:9; Psalm 15:1-2*).
        - By laying his hand on the animal, the priest announced its role – the priest commissioned the animal to serve as the worshipper's blameless representative before God.
        - The death of the unblemished animal and the use of its innocent blood on the altar and entrance to the Tabernacle purified the space for the worshipper; the animal atoned for the worshipper by dying in their place, thereby allowing them access to God's presence (*Leviticus 1:3-5; Ezekiel 43:27*). **God accepted the death of a blameless one on behalf of the sinful worshipper (*Leviticus 17:11*)**, an 'unfair' grace He extended to those seeking His presence.
- The blameless animals in the burnt offering lost their lives because of human sin, delivering graphic messages to Israel.
    - **God's holy presence carries inherent risk for imperfect humans, yet God mitigates that risk because He desires a relationship with people.**
    - **Sin so estranges humanity from God that the only way to re-enter His presence involves losing one's life.**

Applications

- The access to His presence that God provided Israel through the burnt offering presents us with two insights crucial to understanding Him.
    - God's love motivates Him to spare supplicants from the death sentence under which all humans live (*cf. Romans 3:23; 6:23; Deuteronomy 7:6-9; Romans 5:6-8*).
    - God spares people because He desires a relationship with them (*cf. Romans 5:6-11*).
- The offerings God required of Israel also provide insights into sin's character.
    - The offering required to enter God's presence emphasizes sin's destructive and deadly consequences (*cf. James 3:16; Genesis 3-11*).
    - The gruesome nature of the offerings God required of Israel reminds us of the gravity of our choice to elevate our selfish will over God's good will.
- God no longer requires worshippers to present an animal's life to approach Him – He has supplied us with a perfect sacrifice in Jesus (*Hebrews 10:1-16*).
    - Jesus' death on our behalf gives us confidence in God's presence (*Hebrews 4:14, 16*).
    - While Jesus' death gives us life, God still requires us to lose our lives (*Mark 8: 34-35*).